

'Oh, yeah, you just try it then. I'm not having that flea-bag poking its head in at me every time I have a meal. If it's not out of here tonight, I'm getting in touch with the landlord.'

He then smartly turned about and walked down.

Uncle George, holding the lather brush to his face, was left in deep thought, puzzled at why this man should have become so antagonistic towards him. If you think that this is unbelievable then listen to what happened next.

George would not get rid of the goat then because it was Sunday.

'All right,' he said, 'we'll bring it up here.'

'Up here!' my aunt screamed.

'Well it's only for tonight ain't it?'

We had a terrible time getting that nanny up the steep wooden staircase, but after much bleating from this poor animal, and volumes of swearing from my uncle, calling the man downstairs all manner of names, suggesting the doubtful character of himself and his mother, the goat was safely got upstairs. And this put paid to my uncle's plan. He just could not imagine what harm there was in having the goat in the back yard.

My uncle was a real character. For a few weeks he would be loaded with money and do the lot. But he always looked after the kids first, and the rest he enjoyed himself. If he had no money, he wouldn't be without it long. His ingenuity for acquiring money had no end, whether it was by fair means or foul. He was never what you would call broke.

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I wanted to be a sign-writer. If I had had the right guidance, I would have wanted to be an artist, but to me sign-writing was an art. I got a reference from school which no employer even looked at and I found it very difficult to get a job as an apprentice, or even a learner.

'Well,' said Mum. 'You'd better go into the french polishing with Uncle Alf, then.'

My mother had always been a bit of a mystery to me. Here I was, an asthmatic child, being told by my mother to take up french polishing, among the fumes of polish, sawdust, and in very bad working conditions. All I could put this down to was that she didn't understand what sort of trade she was telling me to go into.

At last I managed to get a job from the labour, as a learner sign-writer in Stamford Hill. I rang the bell and waited. I then heard footsteps running down the stairs as though being chased. When the door came open I was then faced with the enormous body of Mr Davis. I never thought it possible for a man of his build to run down stairs like this.

'I'm enquiring about the job.'

'Oh yes, how old are you?'

'Fourteen, sir.'

'Don't call me sir, boy, for gawd's sake. No sir, er, Mr Davis 'll do.'

'I have a reference here from my school. They think I would be suited to sign-writing.'

'Oh, never mind that, can you make tea?'

'Yes, sir - Mr Davis.'

'Are you strong?'

'Oh, yes s . . .'

'Do you think you could lift scaffold boards and push a barrow?'

'Oh yes, I could.'

I was hoping that my tone of voice would make me appear stronger than I looked.

'All right, kid, start Monday.'

Oh boy.

'Thank you sir Davis, er Mr Davis, thank you.'

I was full of joy that afternoon. Never again was I to experience the delight and sense of achievement that I got from getting my first job. I had visions of becoming a first class tradesman, with my own little box of paints and first class brushes and a palette. As soon as my parents came home I told them. Their reply was 'Oh good'. No questions, nothing. My mother wasn't on to me to start work to get some money from me, but it did hurt me deeply when little interest was shown at what I thought was a wonderful achievement. Maybe they were so depressed with their life of work and struggle and an unhappy marriage, that they could find no enthusiasm for anything. Or they may have been just plain indifferent. I don't know.

I reported for work on Monday morning at 8 a.m. I made my way down the sloping alleyway, which was about five hundred yards long. I got to the bottom and there was the shed on the left. All around were scaffold boards, ladders and old shop facias. The two big doors to the shed were open. I looked inside to see two men, one about fifty and the other about twenty-five. The older man spotted me.

'Are you the new boy, then?'

'Yes, sir.'

'I'm Alf and him there is Ron. What's yours?'

'Er, my name's Ron as well.'

'Ah, be jasus, we can't have that now, can we? There's enough fucking confusion around here already. We'll call you Ronald. You ever used a brush, have you?' said Alf.

'Well, I have done a lot of drawing and painting and that.'

'Well forget all that, 'cause you won't be doing any drawing here. Do yer know the primary colours?' he asked.

'I do,' I replied.

'Have you ever mixed oil colours?'

'No, sir.'

'Alf, not sir!' he bawled. 'Well first of all you'd better make a cup of tea.'

This Irish foreman, Alf, was short but heavily built, with a mass of thick, curly black hair, a broad face, wide-set clear blue eyes, broad nose and a healthy red face. Although he only stood about five foot four, he was a fit and powerful man.

He showed me how to mix paints, and this was my job for a

long time, before ever touching a sign-writing brush. After being there about five months I had still not been given the opportunity to use a writer. I thought, perhaps Alf doesn't think I could do it? At home I did a poster, and was inspired to write, 'God is Love'. It turned out beautiful. I thought that if I showed it to Alf he might have a better opinion of me. I couldn't have been more wrong.

'Oh, gawd, bloody blimey. Oh holy mother of God! What are you trying to do: convert me or something? Oh fucking hell, oh it's fucking good boy, fucking good to be sure!'

About a fortnight after this incident, I had a chance to try my hand on some ladders which had the firm's name on them and had to be gone over to liven them up a bit.

'Now then, Ron. I've got to go out on a job, find something for Ronald to do.'

Alf picked up his kit, made his way down the alley and disappeared.

'I know what you can do, Ronald,' said Ron. 'You can paint over the firm's name on them ladders.'

'What me?' I said.

'Yes. But you'll have to keep your eye open for him coming back. At least it's something for you to practise on, and anyway, there's nothing else for you to do.'

I mixed up my paints, got out the ladders, got a box to sit on, and away I went. After a while I could feel I was being watched. I slowly turned round and a few yards behind me was Ron.

'Good kid good. Look, Ronald, take no notice of him.'

'Oh Alf you mean.'

'Who else?' said Ron.

He came nearer so that he was right behind me.

'He's a funny bloke,' he said. 'Mind you he treated me rough when I first started, but what he did to you the other week was daibolical. But never mind kid you keep at it and you'll soon pick it up. It's easy enough writing when you've got the knack, but wait till you have to get up there on those bleeding scaffold boards with a force nine gale blowing up your arse, or when the sun plays on your back till you want to spew your ring up. And the bright colours don't help your eyes much; that's why old Alf's got a squint ain't it? Keep at it son.'

I had been writing for about an hour. Ron had just gone to put an order in for some colours at the office above our shed. Suddenly

I felt someone behind me. It can't be Ron, I thought, he's in the office. Oh no, it can't be comrade Alf. I shouldn't have got so carried away with the job in hand. I slowly turned my head. As I did so, Alf's chin was almost resting on my left shoulder.

'Don't they look attractive enough for you' he said. 'And what makes you think your bleeding wobbly hand is going to improve them? What a liberty you've got. Wipe it off. Ron,' he bawled, 'come here!'

I was sweating hot and cold, and I felt I had committed a most terrible crime.

'Don't you dare let him do that fucking lark anymore, I'm telling you. In fact next time I've got a job outside you will come with me.'

What was going through his mind I was soon to find out during that same week.

'Righto! Ronald get that barrow!'

To me this barrow was a monster on iron treaded wheels of about three feet diameter.

'Now then get those four boards and four tressels and put them on the cart.'

The boards were about two inches thick, and about eight foot long. The tressels were about ten foot long. Ron could see how exhausted I was after the first three boards and made towards me.

'Leave him!' screamed Alf. 'He wants to be a sign writer so he's got to know how to handle ladders and push a barrow.'

Ron gave Alf a look of hatred, but said nothing, probably because if he did his life would be made a misery as well, or perhaps the sack, the most dreaded weapon of all. I finally lifted the last tressel onto the barrow.

'Now then' shouted Alf, 'put me coat on, that bucket and rags, and me kit. O.K. Ron we will see you tonight. I painted the shop front yesterday and I'm going to finish it today, I've got to write and varnish it. Right now then' he said, 'push like fuck!'

I look up the slope of the alleyway and thought god I'll never make that, the weight on the barrow must have been about seven hundredweight. Alf pushed it like wheeling a baby in a pram. As we got half way up the slope Alf eased off so that I had most of the weight.

'Come on' he shouted, 'don't leave it all to me'.

I couldn't even see over the barrow, if I was going straight or not, I was on the kerb side; the barrow must have moved out to the right when a bus just missed the front of the barrow as it passed. Alf

jumped up like he was going into a complicated ballet step.

'Keep the fucking thing straight' he bawled. A woman must have heard this language as she passed, judging by the look of surprise on her face.

We eventually got the job in Stoke Newington High Street. By this time I was sweating profusely, off came our coats and we began to put up our tressels. Alf got out his brushes and colours, made his way up the steps and settled down to write, leaving me at the bottom. I began to cool down and I began to feel cold.

'Alf! I'm breaking me neck' I called.

'Go in the shop, sod you, and ask if you can use theirs'.

I was to make this journey many times in the course of the day. Whether Alf's guardian angel spoke to him or not I don't know, but he shouted to me to come up to him. I had never been on a scaffold before, it must have been about twenty foot up, not very high, but for a novice it seemed about twice that height. I held on for dear life. As I got to the top of the tressels, and had to swing my leg over and onto the boards.

'Come on' cried Alf, 'don't shit your fucking self, just don't look down'.

I didn't want him to think I was scared so I stood as upright as I could, and made towards him. Then it happened: I had trodden on a part where two boards were over-lapping. I did a sort of tap dance where the performer leans the body forward and kicks back his legs alternately. There was Alf doubled over, holding his stomach, red in the face with glee, the happiest I had ever seen him, he was overcome with joy. His joy was quickly broken when on recovering himself he found his front covered in the red paint which was meant for the job. Where he had been leaning over, the small pots clipped to his pallet had tilted, the paint running down the front of his overalls.

'You clumsy git' he said, 'go down and get a cloth off the barrow. No, don't bother I'll go'.

After wiping himself down, he then gave me a brush and I was allowed to paint the inside of the letters, while Alf did the more skilled job of doing the outlines of the letters. After letting me do this my spirits began to rise, with visions of myself carrying my little box, with its paint and oils and brushes inside. I began to make my own sign-writing box, in my spare time in the yard, when I didn't have to mix paints or make boards for the shop fronts. But for some unknown reason Alf would harrass me at every occasion and try to dishearten me. At times I would go home through the

back streets so as to hide my tears from passers-by. I was so unhappy with this man after me all the time, yet I was afraid to pack up in case I couldn't get another job in the sign-writing trade; heaven knows it was difficult enough getting this job let alone a second choice. I was unable to tell my parents my troubles, as they always seemed to be so distant, why I don't know, but there it was. So, when in bed I would pray, I had always prayed. God? I didn't even feel that I knew him or his son, there was no one else, so I prayed. Well, they told me in school to pray if I wanted something, so that's what I did. I got no answer. Alf kept after me, and I had to pack up, I could stand no more. Mr Davis could do nothing about it.

So much for job number one.

'I don't know why you don't go in for french polishing with your Uncle Alf,' my mother would say. After being out for about three months, I tried a little sign-writing shop in Stoke Newington Church Street. The owner didn't want to know if I could make tea, in fact he didn't want to know anything. 'Bring your cards on Monday' and that was it.

He was a big man with a big beard and of more gentle breeding than Alf. One mistake lost me this golden opportunity to learn the trade. Jackson had a small board to write in De Beauvoir Road. He gave me a large empty paint can, and a small one full of paint which was to paint the background with before writing. He also gave me some newspaper and said,

'Put the newspaper in the large can and then put the small tin of paint inside the big one.'

Due to my misunderstanding, I thought he wanted the small tin poured on to the newspaper that had been put in the large can, and this is what I did, thinking it was some kind of trade trick that I hadn't seen yet. When I had finished painting the board it looked shocking. Result: the sack.

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I hunted around for another job, but this time it was impossible. I couldn't find a sign-writing job anywhere. I broke the news to my mother.

'Well I told you to go in the french polishing, didn't I?' she said.

Well I had no interest in french polishing, but it would be something until I could get into the sign-writing, and the money was good, even for a learner, at three bob an hour.

I arrived on the Monday morning at Kings Cabinet Co. in Kingsland Road. I walked through the saw mill amid the noise and dust, shavings clinging to the bottom of my trousers and dust getting in my shoes; I wondered how on earth these men with their dusty caps and faces and leather aprons, stuck this sort of work. On talking, or should I say, shouting to one of them on my way through, I asked this question.

'Oh,' he bawled, 'it's all right. We gets plenty of milk to wash it down with.'

I proceeded up a flight of dangerously steep stairs. As I came to the top, the polishing shop was ahead of me, and to my right was the cabinetmakers'. An old Jewish maker came towards me, short and tubby, his shabby clothes laden with dust, as well as his walrus moustache. He had one eye peering through the dust of his glasses. He looked like an antique model of an old man that had been left laying somewhere and had gathered dust.

'For vot you vant?' he asked.

'I want the polishers'.'

'Ah, de polishers is op dere. Ask for Joe, he is de piece-master.'

A piece-master is one who gets paid for each piece he turns out. He buys his own materials and takes on his own staff; he must get as much out of them as he can, for as little as possible.

I walked forward about ten yards and then entered the polishing shop. The choking stench of polish stain and tea hit me. I became short of breath and used my inhaler. The polishing shop was about